The Riddle of Haji Bakr

By Kyle Orton (@KyleWOrton) on November 10, 2015

Samir al-Khlifawi (Haji Bakr): in Saddam's intelligence service, in American prison, as a commander of the Islamic State

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Introduction

In the last few months I've increasingly focussed on the former (Saddam) regime elements (FREs) within the Islamic State (I.S.). There's now an entire section on this blog about it, and Aaron Zelin over at Jihadology recently gave me time to elaborate in a podcast.

In studying this topic there is one inescapable name: Samir Abd Muhammad al-Khlifawi, better-known by his pseudonym Haji Bakr, and sometimes by his kunya, Abu Bakr al-Iraqi. Al-Khlifawi is a former colonel in an elite intelligence unit of the Saddam Hussein regime—focussed on air defence at Habbaniya airbase, though what exactly that entails is murky. Al-Khlifawi was also apparently involved in weapons development.

Al-Khlifawi came to international attention in April when Christoph Reuter published an article in Der Spiegel naming al-Khlifawi as the "architect" of I.S.'s expansion into Syria, and the man who had been "pulling the strings at IS for years."

A True Believer?

Reuter's piece kicked off what has been an unusually emotive debate about the nature of I.S., which, at its extremes, pitted those who saw al-Khlifawi as the leader of a 'Ba'athist coup' against those who said the FREs had no significance within I.S. at all. Reuter sided broadly with the former, writing that when the leaders of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), I.S.'s predecessor, were killed in April 2010, ISI was in "a state of vulnerability that the tightly organized group of ex-officers sought to exploit". Moreover, when the Syrian rebellion killed al-Khlifawi in Aleppo in January 2014, "They didn't find a Koran anywhere [in his home]," and Reuter quoted Hisham al-Hashimi, an I.S. analyst close to the Iraqi government, saying al-Khlifawi was "a nationalist, not an Islamist".

This description of al-Khlifawi suffers from a very serious timeline problem. Al-Khlifawi had become a "highly influential" member of Jamaat at-Tawhid wal-Jihad (JTJ) before Abu Musab az-Zarqawi pledged allegiance to Osama bin Laden in October 2004 and renamed his organization al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). Indeed, by Reuter's own account, al-Khlifawi had met Zarqawi in 2003 in Anbar Province, where al-Khlifawi is known to have had an important role in the early years after Saddam.

Motivation other than true belief for FREs joining JTJ/AQI in 2003-04 is hard to detect. The Iraqi insurgency was dominated by locals, specifically FREs, until 2005. Zarqawi fought alongside the fallen regime, but any FREs *joining* JTJ/AQI had to repudiate their history and repent. Why, when so many more powerful groups run by former associates were available, would FREs go through all the trouble of gaining admission to JTJ/AQI, a small, foreign-led insurgent group? Why, given the notorious "un-Islamic" behaviour of some FREs, would they join a group where discovery of this behaviour might get them killed—especially when the group is so relatively weak and so many more obvious paths to restoration are available? The incentives on both sides militate against those who are not True Believers joining JTJ/AQI in this period. Even in December 2006, when ISI was struggling, the new leader, Abu Omar al-Baghdadi (real name: Hamid az-Zawi), called on the FREs to join ISI—but only "on condition that the applicant must know, at a minimum, three sections of the Holy Qur'an by rote and must pass an ideological examination".

Al-Khlifawi was one of several military-intelligence officers who joined JTJ/AQI in the immediate aftermath of Saddam's downfall. The changes to the Saddam regime in its last fifteen years, notably the Islamic Faith Campaign, which created a religious movement I have taken to calling "Ba'athi-Salafism" under Saddam's leadership, had transformed a hard-secular regime into an Islamist State, and transformed Iraqi society, leaving a much more Salafized and sectarian population. The Iraqi security forces were deeply affected by the Islamization of Saddam's regime. Ba'athism was a spent force; religion had filled the void. There is every indication that al-Khlifawi was among those who had taken to a variant of Salafism long before the Saddam regime's deposition.

Surviving and Expanding

The years between 2004 and 2012 are murky for al-Khlifawi, but two things are known for certain. One is al-Khlifawi lived; the other is that he was expanding his power within AQI/ISI.

Al-Khlifawi's longevity can partly be ascribed to the fact that military professionals like him moved into the insurgency "not necessarily as its foot soldiers but more as its planners and logistical experts," as Ali Allawi explains in *The Occupation of Iraq: Winning the War, Losing the Peace*, meaning these men were away from the frontlines where casualties among the insurgents were inevitably highest.

Two American actions then accidentally helped al-Khlifawi to live and to rise through ISI's ranks.

First, al-Khlifawi was arrested in 2006 and held between Camp Bucca—now notorious as "little more than social-networking furloughs for jihadists"—and Abu Ghraib until 2008, according to Reuter, which would have kept him out of harm's way during ISI's darkest days. (There is a claim in ISIS's eulogy that al-Khlifawi was imprisoned twice, on one occasion for four years. No further details are available at present.)

Second, the Coalition took apart ISI's leadership structure, including essentially decapitating it by capturing or killing eighty percent of its top forty-two leaders between April and June 2010. The survivors of this cull were largely FREs.

The project to "Iraqize" AQI's image had begun with Zarqawi and the Mujahideen Shura Council in January 2006, and ISI had intensified this effort. But it also became a reality: the clearly failing *jihad* in Iraq under the pressure of the Surge lessened the appeal for the foreign Salafi-jihadists; some of the *muhajireen* left to join other fronts, like Fatah al-Islam in Lebanon; and the attrition rate among the foreigners, most of whom were not militarily skilled, was very high—not least most of them had signed up to be suicide bombers in the first place.

Without foreigners to replace the lost ISI members, the proportion of Iraqis naturally increased and a foreign-led organization became Iraqi-led. It was no accident these Iraqis were FREs. "It was Darwinism," said Derek Harvey, the Defence Intelligence Agency analyst charged with assessing the Iraqi insurgency after Saddam was overthrown. The Surge left "the smarter and more powerful operatives in place … The opaqueness of ISIS today is a reflection of this tradecraft."

It is crucial to underline that the Iraqi leaders of ISI and now I.S. did *not* join after 2010 but had been in the group when it was JTJ/AQI (2003-2006). This was not a takeover by FREs; the FREs were already within ISI and rose to the top because their counterintelligence and operational security skills made them the last men standing.

The Shadow Commander?

Two anonymous I.S. defectors, WikiBaghdady and Abu-Ahmad, claim that al-Khlifawi was really in control of then-ISI after its leaders were killed in April 2010 until his own death. WikiBaghdady is a Twitter account that started publishing ostensible insider information on December 10, 2013, and Abu-Ahmad's testimony appeared on March 28, 2014. WikiBaghdady's sympathies are not as clearly stated as the ferociously polemical Abu-Ahmad, but both are pro-al-Qaeda—which is a problem.

WikiBaghdady and Abu-Ahmad construct a narrative in which irreligious Ba'athists, with al-Khlifawi at the helm, took the chance of ISI's disarray to seize control and utilize the organization in a bid to return to power. For al-Qaeda, this is doubly effective: it identifies I.S. with a supposedly-impious failed regime, and it means that Salafi-jihadism and Islamism more generally are acquitted of I.S.'s crimes—a very effective ideological assault.

The I.S.-as-vehicle-for-Ba'athist-restoration narrative is also helpful to Iraqi Shi'a leaders—both Iran's allies/proxies and nationalists—who for very understandable reasons can mobilize the Iraqi Shi'a community with appeals against the fallen Iraqi regime. (Ditto Kurdish officials.) But this has meant that official statements of the Iraqi government and those connected to Baghdad should be taken with extreme scepticism.

With WikiBaghdady and Abu-Ahmad as key evidence, William McCants wrote of the ISI succession in his new book, *The ISIS Apocalypse* (reviewed here). With so many ISI leaders being cut down, the line of communication with al-Qaeda Central (AQC), Osama bin Laden and Ayman az-Zawahiri in Pakistan, was limited—indeed "broken," according to the U.S. military, by mid-2010. But a communications crisis "can also create opportunities," McCants writes:

> *The Islamic State's Shura Council couldn't meet in conclave for security reasons, so its members had to correspond separately. The head of the Islamic State's military council, … Hajji Bakr[,] wrote each member individually, saying the others had agreed that [Ibrahim Awwad al-Badri al-Samarrai a.k.a. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi] should take charge. Ibrahim was one of the youngest candidates considered, but he had a lot going for him. … Nine of the eleven Shura Council members voted for Ibrahim …*
>
> *Al-Qaeda's leaders heard about Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's appointment in May after everyone else did. …*
>
> *While Baghdadi stalled for time with his leaders in al-Qaeda, he consolidated his hold on power in the Islamic State. At his right hand was the man who had helped him take the throne, Hajji Bakr. … According to insiders, the first order of business for [Haji Bakr] was to purge the Islamic State of leaders he suspected of disloyalty*

> *… He and his boss replaced them with their Iraqi allies, many of whom had served as officers in Saddam's military and intelligence services.*

While the timeline of al-Khlifawi contradicts the notion of I.S. as Ba'athism wrapped in a *shahada*, is it true that al-Khlifawi manipulated the succession in 2010?

At the time Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, with whom al-Khlifawi was on intimate terms, and his Egyptian deputy Abu Hamza al-Muhajir (real name: Abd al-Munim al-Badawi) were killed, al-Khlifawi was "chief of staff," the precursor to I.S.'s Military Council, its most important institution. Al-Khlifawi had taken over as chief of staff from Muhammad an-Nada al-Jiburi (Abu al-Bashair al-Jiburi), who was also known as *al-ra'i* or "the shepherd," it seems in late 2008. Al-Khlifawi's formal rank plus the number of slain ISI leaders means al-Khlifawi was certainly among the handful of most powerful operatives within ISI in April 2010. We have only Abu-Ahmad's word, however, for this story of al-Khlifawi's "wicked idea" to write to the Shura Council members individually and tell them that everybody else was voting for al-Baghdadi.

Independent evidence for al-Khlifawi's actions during the transition—from the killing of Abu Omar and Abu Hamza on April 18, 2010, to the appointment of al-Baghdadi on May 16—is unavailable to us. And drawing conclusions is complicated by the fact that even if al-Khlifawi had the power to make himself ISI's leader in 2010, he would never have taken the job. It doesn't matter the sincerity of belief or service to the cause of Salafi-jihadism: the FREs are tainted by their association with the Ba'ath Party, and it would place I.S. in too vulnerable a spot politically to have these men as the formal *amir al-mumineen* (commander of the faithful).

Assessing whether al-Khlifawi orchestrated al-Baghdadi's appointment as ISI's leader would require judging the status of al-Baghdadi at the time. There is no disagreement that al-Baghdadi's home was one of the mail houses for the network run by Manaf ar-Rawi, one of the few experienced ISI commanders left alive in late 2009, the emir of Baghdad known as "the dictator" to his subordinates. Abu-Ahmad's claim that al-Baghdadi "did not know … the sender and the receiver," which is to say al-Baghdadi was a pawn for senior ISI officials, is contradicted by a then-current "senior official" in I.S. in late 2014, who says al-Baghdadi was "the closest aide" to Abu Omar, and "sometimes drafted" Abu Omar's letters to Bin Laden. Regardless, Abu Omar's letters "always started" with al-Baghdadi. Add to al-Baghdadi's close proximity to Abu Omar the fact he had been radicalized before the U.S. invasion and had run his own militia afterwards, and it is suggestive that al-Baghdadi wasn't a mere cut-out.

It does seem that AQC was blindsided by al-Baghdadi's appointment. A letter captured in Abbottabad shows Bin Laden writing to Jamal al-Misrati ("Atiyya"), his Libyan chief of staff, on July 6, 2010 to say:

> *It would be good of you to provide us with detailed information about our brother Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi … and his first lieutenant and deputy An-Nasser Lideen Allah, a.k.a. Abu Sulayman [real name: Numan az-Zaydi]. It would be better for you to ask several sources among our brothers there, whom you trust, about them so*

> *that the matter becomes clear to us. I also would like that you ask our brothers in Ansar al-Islam Organization where they stand on the new Emirs.*

This isn't conclusive one way or the other on whether AQC didn't know al-Baghdadi and his "war minister" *at all*, or whether AQC just did not know them well. This is not that surprising:

> *I.S.'s current leaders do not tend to have … AQC connections in their background but instead to be largely Iraqis tied into the interlinked local networks of military-intelligence officers of the fallen Saddam regime, which had been heavily Islamized before the end, and the non-governmental Iraqi Salafist Trend. It's not an ideological question, since I.S.'s leaders were among AQI's founders; it's just about who they know.*

There is a report that Bin Laden's preferred successor to Abu Omar was Abd al-Rahman al-Qaduli (Abu Ali al-Anbari, Abu Ala al-Afri, Haji Iman), who *does* have AQC background. It is difficult to assess its credibility, but it goes to the heart of the "war of the narratives," namely what the actual relationship between ISI and AQC was from 2006 onwards.

In May 2014, Zawahiri issued his first major response after expelling ISIS from al-Qaeda. In the course of saying that all of ISI's leaders had sworn *baya* (in secret) to AQC, Zawahiri quotes letters where ISI had written to AQC as if ISI was subordinate to AQC. Perhaps, or perhaps not. The letters were not made independently available. In either case, Zawahiri conceded that AQC was not consulted about ISI's succession.

But considerations about AQC don't tell us much about ISI since it is quite clear that ISI in general ran its affairs without very much reference to AQC—refusing to provide updates on the military situation and continuing to attack Shi'a civilians despite AQC's opposition—so if al-Khlifawi orchestrated an end-run around AQC's desires for the 2010 transition, this would not be particularly surprising. The question is whether al-Khlifawi manipulated al-Baghdadi into office against the procedures of ISI, and on that we simply don't know.

Both WikiBaghdady and Abu-Ahmad record a series of assassinations *within* ISI after al-Baghdadi took office, and say al-Khlifawi organized these. Both WikiBaghdady and Abu-Ahmad contend—as has also been put in more academic form—that this was a 'Ba'athist' post-2010 leadership purging the 'hardcore Salafist' AQI faction within ISI. But this argument falls: the post-2010 leaders *are* AQI members going back to its founding or just after. The difference was that the post-2010 ISI leaders were very noticeably the *Iraqi* AQI members, bringing to effective completion the Iraqization process that began four years earlier.

Al-Baghdadi "presided over an assassination campaign against any of his commanders suspected of potential disloyalty" in 2010, according to Charles Lister. One of the two men who voted against al-Baghdadi, Jamal al-Hamdani, was liquidated in this period. Piecing together the

various fragments, it does seem that there was some kind of purge within ISI in 2010, possibly extending into 2011.

Making this more believable still: ISI's strategy in adapting to the surge was significantly based on assassinating the Awakening leaders—1,300 fell to ISI's assassins between 2009 and 2014. And in its death notice for al-Khlifawi, ISIS said that al-Khlifawi had been assigned to "wage the war of the silencers," which is this assassination campaign. Given ISI's structure—a centralized leadership with decentralized cells—it is eminently possible that at the time al-Baghdadi took over some cells resisted the new leadership. This purge, however, shows no signs of having an ideological character; it was purely about authority.

In short, while we can never be sure of the exact details of the ISI transition in 2010, it does seem likely that al-Khlifawi was one of, if not *the*, most powerful and well-placed operatives inside ISI after the killing of Abu Omar and Abu Hamza. Whether al-Khlifawi was powerful enough and positioned well enough to pick the new leader, and whether he used that power and position, will likely never be known. In either event, it does appear that al-Khlifawi helped stabilize the new regime of al-Baghdadi by eliminating rivals and dissidents within ISI.

Early days in Syria

WikiBaghdady describes al-Khlifawi as Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's "private minister," and al-Khlifawi certainly became al-Baghdadi's deputy. But al-Khlifawi likely became al-Baghdadi's deputy after the death of Numan az-Zaydi, a long-time associate of al-Baghdadi's who had served in that role and officially as ISI's "war minister" from May 2010. Though Iraqi forces claimed to have killed Zaydi in February 2011, there were reports as late as 2014 that Zaydi was still alive. ISI's spokesman confirmed Zaydi as dead in the summer of 2011, however, and such notices are generally reliable.

By one account, after Zaydi's death the "war minister" post—generally held by foreigners to this point, who were unencumbered by local ties when giving orders for brutality, and who were also usually the emir's deputy (as in the case of Zaydi and Abu Hamza)—was abolished and the Military Council formed. This is plausible. The last ISI chief of staff, al-Khlifawi, became the first head of the Military Council at this point, and the chief of staff role was likewise retired. Notably, the known chiefs of staff were FREs, Muhammad an-Nada and then al-Khlifawi.

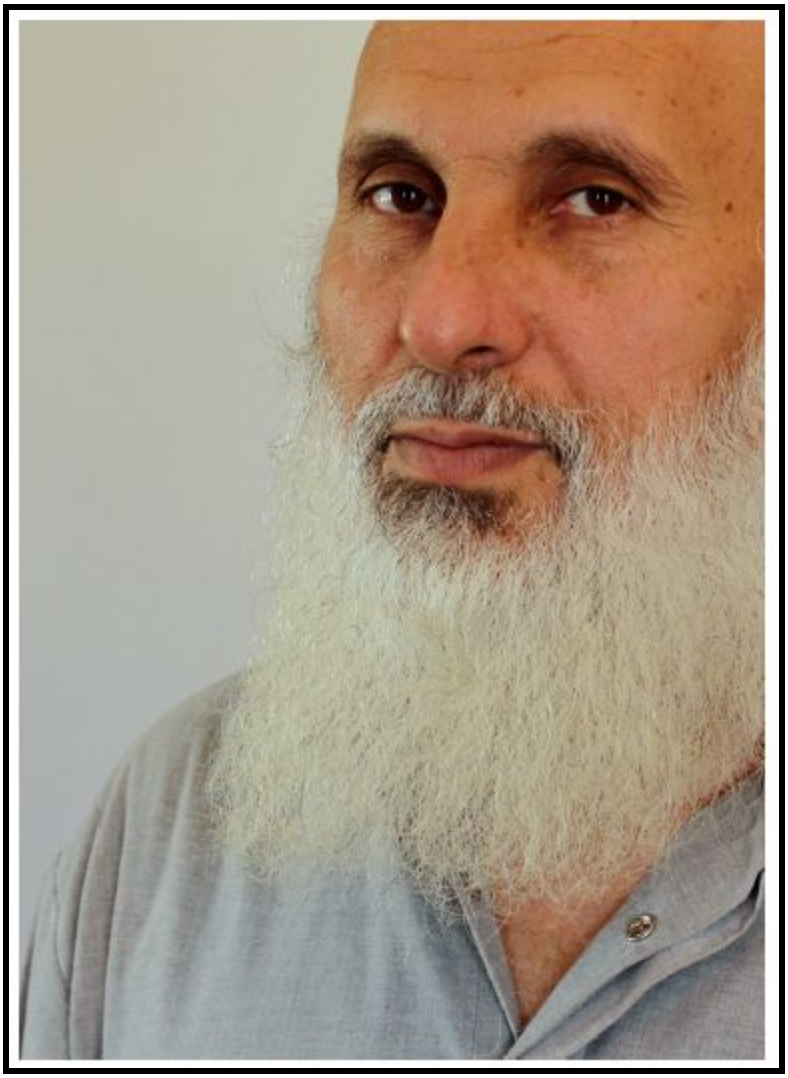
Thus, any insinuation of al-Baghdadi being merely a puppet for al-Khlifawi is hard to maintain; al-Baghdadi had a support system of his own, including Zaydi, when he came into office, and al-Khlifawi was at some distance from the caliph hierarchically until early 2011. More importantly, al-Khlifawi was at some distance geographically from late 2010, meaning that even if it were true that al-Baghdadi was initially reliant on al-Khlifawi to maintain office, such a period of dependency cannot have lasted very long.

Al-Khlifawi "remained [in Iraq] until the end of 2010, when he was tasked with emigrating to Syria" and "supervising the course of operations in Aleppo," his eulogy said. Adnan as-Suwaydawi (Abu Muhannad al-Suwaydawi), also formerly an intelligence colonel in al-Khlifawi's air defence unit, was released in 2010 and moved straight to the Latakia area. This suggests that ISI sent a small group of its most capable military officials to northwest Syria in late 2010.

Al-Baghdadi sending al-Khlifawi, one of his most powerful operatives, into Syria at such a time—when ISI is beginning its recovery in Iraq—suggests a number of things. Primarily it suggests that ISI was not as badly damaged as the U.S. believed, and that al-Baghdadi was more secure and exercised greater power than those who see him as the leader-in-name-only would argue. It is in the realm of speculation but it might also suggest that al-Baghdadi wanted to avoid the curse of the Praetorian. Above all it underlines what fertile ground Syria was for ISI because of the Assad-supervised ratlines, which gave ISI a foothold long before 2011.

In the summer of 2011, ISI dispatched agents into Syria to set up a Levantine branch of the organization, what we now know as Jabhat an-Nusra, which was announced in January 2012. Nusra was formed from this ISI advanced party, the violent Salafists Assad released from Sednaya in May and June 2011 as part of the regime's "willed blowback" strategy to deliberately

radicalize the insurrection, and the cells and networks leftover from when Assad used I.S. to attack the elected government and Anglo-American forces in Iraq.



Back to Iraq and the Break with Nusra

Al-Khlifawi's eulogy says that he went to Syria in 2010 and later "returned" to Syria; the only place he can have gone is Iraq. The likeliest trigger for al-Khlifawi's return from Syria to Iraq is Zaydi's death, which would mean al-Khlifawi was *not* in Syria when the ISI/Nusra advanced party arrived in August 2011.

ISI's Military Council began a major operation in Iraq in July 2012, "Breaking the Walls," taking advantage of the American withdrawal to release its most hardened members from Iraqi prisons and stoke sectarian tensions. Al-Khlifawi was likely back in Iraq to oversee the beginning of this operation. By late 2012, al-Khlifawi was needed to attend to a larger issue.

Al-Khlifawi moved back into Syria in December 2012, allegedly accompanied by Taha Subhi Falaha (Abu Muhammad al-Adnani), I.S.'s powerful current spokesman. This trip was made in relation to the confrontation then building between ISI and Nusra that would soon explode into the most serious breach there has ever been in the Salafi-jihadist universe.

Up to the summer of 2012, Nusra had been a fairly conventional terrorist group: small, secretive, and striking civilian-heavy and relatively defenceless targets. In the last few months of 2012, Nusra moved toward being a conventional insurgent group, lacing itself into the rebellion, providing suicide bombers to break hard targets and refraining from imposing the *hudud* while providing social services—socializing the population to al-Qaeda's views and meanwhile using the rebellion as a shield to protect their global *jihadi* agenda. By the time Nusra was designated a terrorist organization by the U.S. in December 2012, crowds that had months earlier turned out against Nusra now turned out to declare: "We are all Jabhat an-Nusra!"

An interesting point of dispute is whether Nusra's strategy of tangling or embedding itself in the rebellion was signed-off on by both al-Qaeda and ISI. Given the way ISI behaved from the moment it publicly announced itself on Syrian territory and the condemnations it has made of al-Qaeda for delaying the imposition of the harshest shari'a, it might be assumed ISI had always opposed Nusra's strategy. But that doesn't seem to be the case. As one Nusrawi explained it: "This [initially hiding Nusra's al-Qaeda/ISI ties] was a plan from Golani himself. We would show our values, deal with people well, and then after a while we'd tell them, 'The al Qaeda that was smeared in the media? This is it. We are it. What do you think of us…?" Al-Baghdadi's speech attempting to publicly take control of Nusra said (p. 123) that ISI had concealed its ties to Nusra so that Syrians could "get to know Jabhat an-Nusra on their own terms." At all events, with Nusra's popularity—passive and active—building among the population and the rebel groups in Syria, Nusra's leader Abu Muhammad al-Golani was not so reliant on al-Baghdadi.

Al-Baghdadi clearly felt Nusra had gotten too far out of ISI's control (and was perhaps also a little jealous that Nusra's success was not being attributed to him), and al-Khlifawi would certainly have been involved in planning how to bring Nusra to heel. Worried about the loyalty of al-Golani, al-Khlifawi "decided to send spies [into Syria] to watch [his] every move," according to

WikiBaghdady, but many of these ISI spies went over al-Golani's side. So al-Khlifawi went personally. The moment ISI's leaders seem to have decided al-Golani was fully lost was when Falaha tried to organized a terrorist strike against ETILAF in Turkey, on al-Baghdadi's order, and al-Golani intervened to stop him.

Al-Baghdadi's next move cannot have been a complete surprise to al-Golani. Not only had al-Golani discovered al-Khlifawi's spies around him. Al-Golani had justified his disobedience to al-Baghdadi over the ETILAF strike on grounds that the oppositionists al-Baghdadi wanted murdered were Muslims and dampening Turkey's support for the Syrian revolution by taking the war onto Ankara's soil would affect Nusra's operational room, too. Al-Baghdadi was not convinced and, according to "multiple Syrian Salafist and jihadist sources" and WikiBaghdady, sent a secret message to al-Golani, delivered by al-Khlifawi, not only protesting al-Golani's disobedience but demanding that al-Golani publicly announce he was an auxiliary of ISI. WikiBaghdady records: "The Colonel [al-Khlifawi] and al-Baghdadi sent a strongly-worded letter and gave al-Golani two choices: either execute the orders or Jabhat an-Nusra will be dissolved and replaced with the creation of a new entity. Al-Golani stopped replying."

Still, after the caliph himself arrived in Syria in late February or early March 2013—allegedly staying for six months—he did not yet openly treat al-Golani as an enemy. Al-Baghdadi tried (again) to get al-Golani to voluntarily announce his subordination, but was rebuffed quickly, as he must have known he would be. Al-Baghdadi then determined to launch a hostile takeover by announcing in public that Nusra was subordinate to him, and sought to prepare the ground by secretly gaining the allegiance of Nusra commanders ahead of time. Al-Baghdadi made his announcement on April 8; on April 10, al-Golani rejected it and "reaffirmed" his *baya* to AQC—the first time Nusra publicly acknowledged its al-Qaeda connection. For the Salafi-jihadists on the ground, this brought a state of limbo, and technically meant ISI had no loyalists in Syria—except that it did.

In keeping with the tradecraft of Saddam's totalitarian regime, ISI—in the person of al-Khlifawi in Syria—had a "track two," where allegiance did not run through al-Golani to al-Baghdadi. The first group to defect from Nusra to ISIS was in Aleppo, led by Amr al-Absi, better-known as Abu Atheer al-Absi. The Absi family had been the backbone of the "track two" policy, and it was Atheer who helped arrange al-Baghdadi's relocation to Syria in the spring of 2013.

Atheer, currently one of I.S.'s most senior leaders, led Katibat Usood al-Sunna (The Lions of the Sunna Brigade) in Homs, which used, from its founding in February 2012, symbols with the phrase "Islamic State" on them. After Atheer's brother, Firas, was killed by rebels in August 2012, Atheer took over his group, the not-coincidentally named Majlis Shura Mujahideen (MSM), or "Mujahideen Shura Council". MSM was officially under Nusra's banner, but always known to be somewhat autonomous. (Atheer is also a relative of Shaker al-Absi, a known asset of Assad's intelligence who worked with Zarqawi to assassinate USAID's Laurence Foley in Amman in 2002.) Atheer helped draw foreigners from Nusra to ISIS, and would later become the ISIS governor of Aleppo, before being moved to Homs, and then out to Deir Ezzor.

The foothold MSM gave ISIS in western Aleppo also allowed ISIS to ensure that another part of the "track two"—Tarkhan Batirashvili (Abu Omar al-Shishani)—stuck with the program. By the time Batirashvili formed Jaysh al-Muhajireen wa-Ansar in March 2013 he had already been secretly recruited by al-Khlifawi. Still, Batirashvili hesitated in following through with his secret pledge to ISIS after the schism with Nusra went public. Al-Khlifawi first tried religious persuasion, according to WikiBaghdady, sending one of ISIS's then-top shar'is, Abu Bakr al-Qahtani, to explain to Batirashvili why it was obligatory to join ISIS; when that did not succeed al-Khlifawi sent another Saudi, Abu Ali an-Najdi, who used to be on Twitter as @aboalialsultanto, to tell Batirashvili he would be liquidated if he disobeyed ISIS. It was Atheer's presence in Kafr Hamra, adjacent to Batirashvili's headquarters in Hraytan, that made this threat believable. Batirashvili "became really scared and began informing everyone around him," some of whom he knew were al-Khlifawi's spies, "that he wasn't planning on leaving and Haji Bakr ordered him to release an official statement saying so," according to WikiBaghdady. Batirashvili recovered some footing and leverage, showing that he could command a large following to defy al-Khlifawi. However, Batirashvili must have known that this was no use to him personally in avoiding Atheer's assassins. Seemingly reaching a compromise, Batirashvili managed to resist issuing a public statement of loyalty to ISIS, but he became ISIS's northern emir in May 2013, a de facto statement of loyalty. This ambiguity—Batirashvili serving publicly as an ISIS official while leading a group loyal to al-Qaeda's Caucasus Emirate—was resolved in November 2013 when Batirashvili's *baya* to ISIS was publicly announced. (ISIS claims Batirashvili's *baya* was given on Oct. 10). Batirashvili left JMA with a faction of ISIS loyalists that included Mohammed Emwazi ("Jihadi John").

Al-Qaduli, ISIS's most respected and important cleric, worked closely with al-Khlifawi and as-Suwaydawi during ISIS's expansion in Syria in 2013 as the public face of ISIS in its meetings with groups and individuals to try to woo them to ISIS's. Atheer, who would go on to be a "roving ambassador" for ISIS in northern Syria in late 2013 and a major advocate of restoring the caliphate, brought with him to ISIS virtually all of Nusra's infrastructure in Aleppo, and was especially good at recruiting the foreign fighters away from Nusra. One of the foreigners who came with Atheer and who "became one of [al-Khlifawi's] closest companions," according to I.S.'s *Rumiyah* magazine, was the Australian Ezzit Raad (Abu Mansur al-Muhajir).

Having competing lines of authority, spies within your own spy networks, and a blend of religious zealotry and a cult of the leader was right out of the playbook of the fallen Police State that al-Khlifawi had helped run in Iraq. Now al-Khlifawi would devote himself to building a State in its image on Syrian soil.

Building the caliphate in Syria

Almost as soon as the ISI-Nusra schism began, the rechristened ISIS began an organized State-building program in Syria, trying to monopolize control in the liberated areas:

> *In the spring of 2013 … the first signs of ISIS administration emerge. … Central to the first stages of an ISIS presence in a given area was the establishment of a da'wah office, which would not only function as a means of social outreach and recruitment of members of the local population, but also as a front for gathering intelligence on ISIS rivals in the local area, plainly with the intention of undermining and destroying them.*

This put ISIS on a collision course with the other insurgents; with the regime, ISIS could—and largely still does—live and let live.

The Dawa Offices were always first. Saddam's Faith Campaign mass-produced mosques that preached the sole legitimacy of Saddam's Ba'athi-Salafist movement and which were infiltrated by intelligence officers, to watch, recruit, and manipulate the faithful. Al-Khlifawi's Dawa Offices in Syria followed the script perfectly as they spread to Manbij, ad-Dana, and Azaz in Aleppo—areas notably close to al-Khlifawi's headquarters in Tel Rifaat.

The spies from each town or village recruited by ISIS's Dawa Offices provided the same information:

- A list the powerful families, and individuals within them, to enable the co-optation or decapitation of the socio-political leadership;
- The income streams of powerful individuals. This gave ISIS the chance to infiltrate individuals' networks, and also told ISIS how it could pressure powerful individuals' revenue streams and if there was a point in doing so—would the individual switch to ISIS for the right offer? Or would they have to be killed?
- The names and the sizes of rebel brigades in the village to gauge the scale of the potential armed opposition.
- Names of rebel units' leaders and their religio-political orientation. If the brigades are Islamist, ISIS reasoned that they were potentially amenable to persuasion and infiltration; if they were nationalists then they would have to be forcibly disarmed.
- Illegal/immoral activities of rebels and activists, which could be used to blackmail them. Corruption, regime connections, and atrocities were important at brigade level. At a personal level homosexuality was considered a massive vulnerability, and adultery, atheism, and alcoholism were likewise seen as useful to ISIS.

ISIS married into the powerful families, to spy on them and try to direct them, and either intimidated or replaced the imams at the mosques in areas under ISIS control. Clans, old scores (and many new ones since the war began), and ego gave al-Khlifawi much to work with in his

divide-and-rule policy, and the abundance of poor and/or adventure-seeking young men made it easier still.

The authoritarian proto-government ISIS set up had features unmistakably Saddamist in its structure. As Reuter explains:

> *For each provincial council, [al-Khlifawi] had planned for an emir … to be in charge of murders, abductions, snipers, communication and encryption, as well as an emir to supervise the other emirs … From the very beginning, the plan was to have the intelligence services operate in parallel … The spy cells at the local level reported to the district emir's deputy. The goal was to have everyone keeping an eye on everyone else.*

Saddam had multiple intelligence agencies, all of them reporting directly back to him, which had deliberately overlapping missions to provide for double-checking—helping weed out the incompetent and the disloyal—and which had spying on one-another as a core duty to prevent any agency of the State becoming too powerful, and therefore threatening to the ruler. A "barrier of fear" was descending—including *within* ISIS.

Also very much in the spirit of Saddam Hussein, there was the "terrorizing and enticement" (*al-tarhib wal-targhib*) aspect. Reuter's documents show that from the start, al-Khlifawi's statelet focussed on the ruthless suppression of dissent *and* welfare. Espionage, intimidation, kidnapping, and murder would be used to decapitate the socio-political elite in any given area and eliminate those who fit the profile of a *potential* oppositionist—exactly as the NKVD/KGB did as the Soviets conquered Eastern Europe—and ISIS followed it up with plans to jump-staring the local economy and provide schools, day-care, and transportation. And all of this was overseen by a careful media strategy to present an image of order and justice, an alternative to the savage sectarianism of the regime and the banditry into which many rebel units had devolved.

"When IS was forced to rapidly abandon its headquarters … they tried to burn their archive, but they ran into a problem similar to that confronted by the East German secret police 25 years earlier: They had too many files," Reuter writes, adding that the captured documents showed "a caliphate run by an organization that resembled East Germany's notorious Stasi".

Neither the resemblance to the KGB nor the STASI is accidental. Saddam directly worked with the head of the KGB, Yuri Andropov, who managed to combine a ruthless, self-sustaining repression of internal dissent with agitprop to raise global sympathy for the Soviet Union, to reorganize *al-Amn al-Amm* (the internal secret police) in the 1970s. The STASI also trained al-Amn, and especially in its paperwork and bureaucratic structure—its mania for recording its crimes and the official language of euphemism—the Iraqi Ba'ath regime resembled the STASI.

It was men emerging from this military-intelligence structure who led the building of I.S.'s statelet in Syria, including the security units (*Amniyat*) as part of the counterintelligence architecture that

would sustain it, allowing I.S. to recruit large numbers, with relatively little vetting, while keeping its leadership insulated against spies and assassins.

Meanwhile, ISIS had made it too dangerous for journalists to report from the areas they held—Atheer's group was an especially important actor here, beginning in 2012—which meant ISIS's media output (and the regime's) were the only sources of information from inside Syria. And the FREs familiarity with Active Measures meant they could shape reality even for people on the ground. As Reuter describes:

> *Islamic State … increased its clout with a simple trick: The men always appeared wearing black masks, which not only made them look terrifying, but also meant that no one could know how many of them there actually were. When groups of 200 fighters appeared in five different places one after the other, did it mean that IS had 1,000 people? Or 500? Or just a little more than 200?*

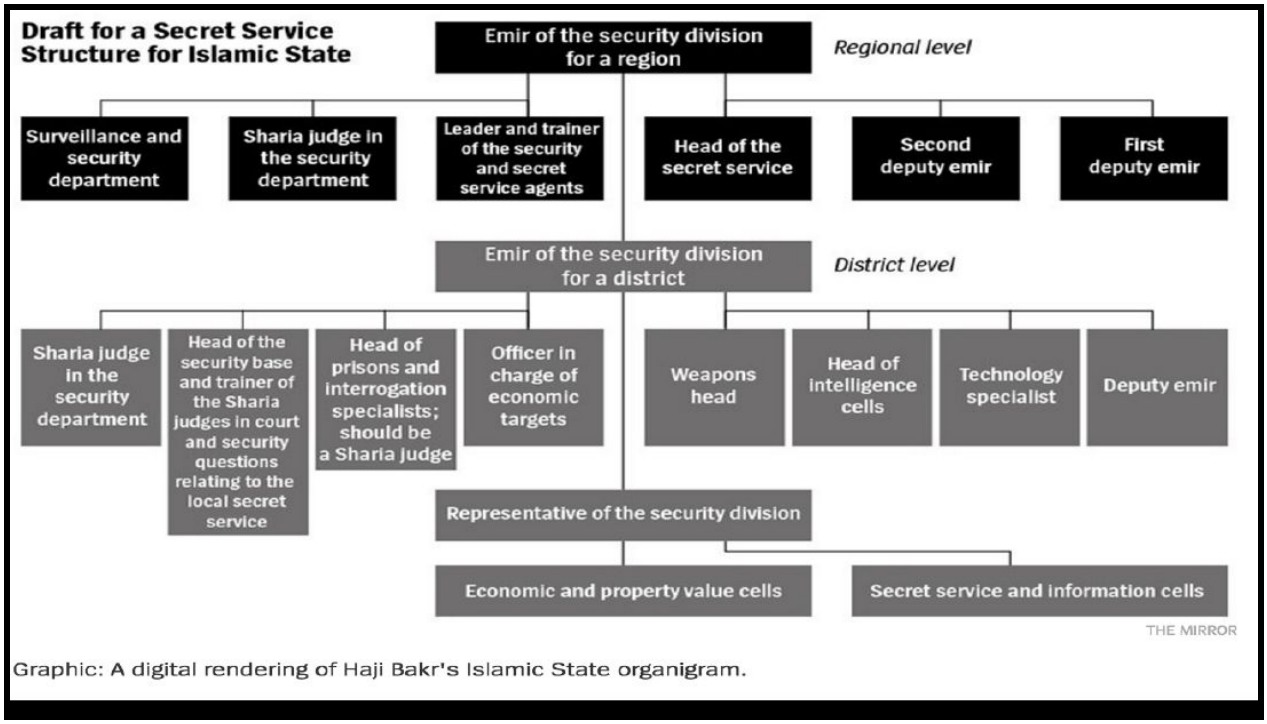
This continues to this day. In Mosul, I.S. have made men grow their beards so that I.S.'s members blend into the city, ensuring nobody knows who I.S. members are or how many, significantly complicating resistance activities.

Throughout late 2013, ISIS carefully advanced, agreeing to joint administration and then purging everybody else, taking over town after town in northern Syria, with its greatest prize being its consolidation of control in Raqqa City in October 2013. ISIS finally miscalculated with the grisly murder of Abu Rayyan and was taken off-guard by the rebel offensive that began against ISIS on January 3, 2014. Al-Khlifawi was apparently killed on January 6, and his family arrested by Liwa at-Tawhid—this came to light only in September 2014, when it was reported that al-Khlifawi's family had been released as part of the hostage exchange for the staff at Turkey's Consulate in Mosul.

By the time of the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq, ISI was well into its recovery but the removal of this final barrier and the stern turn to authoritarian sectarianism in Baghdad allowed ISI to rekindle the Iraqi civil war in December 2013; in tandem with the lack of assistance to the Syrian rebellion this gave ISIS the context it needed for its conquests. These conquests were significantly directed by FREs who had worked closely with al-Khlifawi, notably Adnan Ismail Najem al-Bilawi, a former captain in Saddam's army, who planned the Mosul offensive. With the weapons and resources captured in Iraq, ISIS was able to complete the turn of the tide in Syria.

Al-Khlifawi and his background in Saddam's intelligence services have been rather oversold as the innovator of I.S.'s State-building model. That model was developed over a long period of time by I.S., and al-Khlifawi was in many ways more an implementer more than a pioneer. Al-Qaduli's presence among the creators of I.S.'s statelet in Syria is a reminder that al-Qaeda's input is important, too. Still, al-Khlifawi was effective and might even be said to have perfected the model, and it is difficult not to think his former life as one of Saddam's spies had something

to do with that. However that is assessed, the model al-Khlifawi oversaw in Syria has been institutionalized and continues on.



Graphic: A digital rendering of Haji Bakr's Islamic State organigram.

Conclusion

The leading role of FREs like Samir al-Khlifawi in the Islamic State does not—despite the wish of some apologists—in the least bit suggest a lack of religious sincerity. Rather it is a reflection of the profound impact of Saddam's Islamization of the Iraqi government and society. The takfiri-jihadist organization led by Zarqawi, which entered Iraq nearly a year before the invasion and was sheltered in Baghdad, has remained remarkably consistent in its program. To put it simply: the people who have joined I.S., especially at the senior levels, have adapted to the group's ideology, not the other way around. The wish is rather father to the thought that I.S. is *really* run by rational people whose demands can eventually be accommodated.

The story of al-Khlifawi's role in I.S.'s rise is a fascinating and complex one, innately alluring because it includes covert intrigue and conspiracy, and it has allowed many interpretations. Much information is still missing. Still, some preliminary conclusions can be reached.

The most important conclusion about al-Khlifawi is that he was a Salafist and joined Zarqawi's group out of ideological conviction. The Islamization of the Saddam regime had particularly affected the security forces, and in the aftermath of the regime many of the FREs resisted the new order not in the hopes of a Saddamist restoration, but because it ended Sunni hegemony, promised democracy, and empowered the Shi'a.

It is true that there is some reason to wonder whether these old military-intelligence men from the Saddam years are eschatologists, and the real question being asked here is whether I.S. can in some sense be lived with—as we lived with Saddam's regime for so long. It is also true that, for now, the Iraqi leaders of I.S., whether they are apocalypse-addled or simply revanchists, follow the same program. I.S.'s emphasis is on caliphate-now, not apocalypse-now. Unlike Juhayman al-Utaybi's group, which took over the Grand Mosque in Mecca in November 1979 with only a week's worth of food—rather disadvantaging them when the apocalypse didn't arrive and they had to resist a siege—I.S. clearly intends to "remain and expand" on this mortal coil for a lot longer than a week. The prophecies I.S. plays up seem more millenarian—creating utopia to prepare for the apocalypse—than strictly apocalyptic. The question then becomes whether the eschatologists or revanchists would have the upper-hand if I.S. took Baghdad. This is unanswerable.

In the "war of the narratives" between al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, no side is clearly correct—and both seem to have relied on a good deal of willed ambiguity between 2006 and 2013-14. It is clear that AQC never had much control over I.S.—one of the few mechanisms of influence AQC has over its affiliates is money and AQC never even had that over I.S.—and it seems that the man AQC thought they had at the helm of I.S., Abu Hamza, had not only lost ground to his Iraqi co-president Abu Omar but had 'gone native'. But it also seems that I.S. treated AQC, in private communications, as if AQC was I.S.'s leader.

Al-Khlifawi was part of the Iraqization of I.S.'s leadership between 2006 and its effective completion in 2010, which further degraded AQC's influence within I.S.. The allegations that al-Khlifawi deliberately defied AQC and manipulated the succession process of I.S. in 2010 to install Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi are (thus far) unsubstantiated. There is a strong indication that al-Khlifawi was responsible for stabilizing al-Baghdadi's new regime by eliminating rivals and dissidents within the organization.

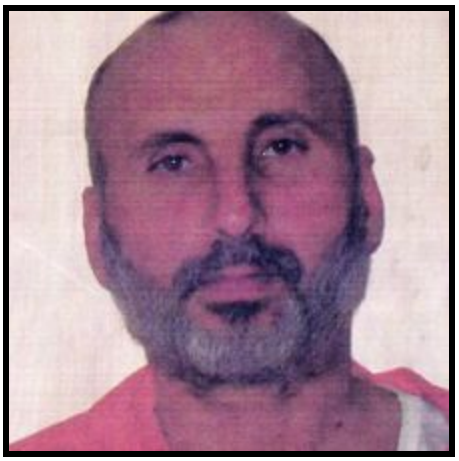
From the evidence, notably al-Khlifawi's move to Syria at the end of 2010, the notion of al-Khlifawi as the real power behind al-Baghdadi's throne seems overstated, at least in Iraq. In Syria, as the State-building project gets underway in 2013, *al-amir ad-dhalam* (the prince of the shadows), as al-Khlifawi was called, and a cabal of FREs were directing I.S.'s expansion. Again to say FREs is *not* to cast doubt on their ideological sincerity—Adnan as-Suwaydawi especially was a fanatic who directed his fury against FSA-style rebels because they worked with "apostate" and "infidel" governments—it is simply one of networks and skills.

Al-Khlifawi, as-Suwaydawi, and al-Bilawi, who were among those leading I.S.'s expansion into Syria, came from a military-intelligence service trained by the KGB and had the experience of running an authoritarian government—one that was increasingly Islamist in its last fifteen years. Seizing control of populated areas by identifying and co-opting or eliminating those who would resist through espionage, counter-intelligence, and propaganda—all second nature to ex-Saddamists, and now second nature to the Islamic State. But the original plan for I.S.'s statelet in Iraq and its expansion in the region had been worked out by Zarqawi and a senior al-Qaeda leader (while in Iran, ironically), and the imprint of the parent organization continues to show.

Al-Khlifawi gives pause on two American policies: the prisons and de-Ba'athification.

The catch-and-release policy during the U.S. regency in Iraq was clearly catastrophic. The prison authorities never properly ascertained who they were holding, never separated reconcilables from rejectionists, and released prisoners too quickly. The U.S. held at most 60,000 detainees in Iraq in late 2007. At that time Camp Bucca had 26,000 inmates; 21,000 by June 2008; and 17,000 by October 2008. That al-Khlifawi and so many others were once in custody underlines a terrible missed opportunity, and the broader political problem of the United States in constantly looking for the exit—believing the surge was a done-deal rather than a process and an opportunity that could be sustained.

De-Ba'athification will likely remain in perpetuity a controversial issue. The consensus now is that the policy pushed skilled men into the insurgency, and that is certainly true. But many of these men—the most important ones—were also war criminals, and working with them was politically impossible: eighty percent of Iraq's population, the Shi'is and Kurds, rejected working with the blood-stained pillars of the old order. There is a conception-vs.-execution issue, and that should probably be the debate's centre of gravity.



Samir Abd Muhammad al-Khlifawi

Birth name	Samir Abd Muhammad al-Khlifawi
Nickname(s)	'Knight of the Silencers'[1] 'Lord of the Shadows'[2]
Born	ca. 1958–1964[2] Iraq
Died	January 2014 (late fifties)[2] northern Syria
Allegiance	Baathist Iraq (unknown–2003) Al-Qaeda (2004–2013) • Al-Qaeda in Iraq (2004–2006) • Mujahideen Shura Council January–October 2006 • Islamic State of Iraq (2006–2013) Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (2013–2014)
Service/ branch	Iraqi Army (until 2003) ISIL military (8 April 2013 – January 2014)
Rank	Colonel (until 2003) ISIL Military Chief and overall leader of ISIL in Syria (April 2010 – January 2014)[3]
Battles/wars	1991 Iraq War 2003 Iraq War Iraqi insurgency Syrian Civil War • Inter-rebel conflict during the Syrian Civil War †